Rethinking Principal Evaluation

A New Paradigm Informed by Research and Practice

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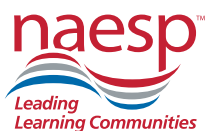
Improving Principal Evaluation Is Long Overdue

Research over the past 30 years clearly demonstrates that principals are important catalysts for shaping school improvements, creating lasting foundations for student learning and accelerating teacher effectiveness. Our nation's 95,000 public school principals influence 3 million teachers and 55 million students, pre-K through grade 12, and are pivotal to ensuring that all students achieve. The Wallace Foundation report, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, stated the case clearly when it found that:

> **Leadership is second only to teaching among school influences on student success.**
>
> **The impact of leadership is most significant in schools with the greatest needs.**

However, the research to date on principal evaluation also suggests that many state and district evaluations do not reflect existing principal standards or proven practices, and many principal evaluation instruments are neither technically sound nor useful for improving principal performance—despite the proven importance of the principal to school and student success. An even greater concern is that many principals and assistant principals are never formally evaluated in any meaningful way.

As a default, many states and districts are beginning to use student test scores as a way of evaluating principals. But these measures taken alone can seriously distort realities and are woefully insufficient for providing principals and assistant principals the information they need to improve their work and their schools. States and districts are encouraged to avoid an over-reliance on standardized test scores of student achievement in favor of multiple measures designed to encompass the entirety of a student's learning experience.

The research on principal evaluation is surprisingly thin. What does exist varies widely in purpose, topic and methodology. However, some key points identified in recent research provide helpful insights into improved practices of principal evaluation that can be implemented and tested in a variety of district and school improvement efforts. For instance, the existing research does suggest that the quality of *how* principal evaluations are conducted may be even more important than the content of *what* the evaluations contain. A 2011 WestEd study titled *The Policies and Practices of Principal Evaluation: A Review of the Literature* stated that "implementation trumped instrumentation in terms of how well evaluations were conducted, how evaluations were perceived by principals, and how connected effective evaluations were to promoting the principals' professional growth."

> **While principals expect to be held accountable for increasing student achievement results, summative test scores reflect a narrow definition of "student success."**

In an era of high-stakes testing, more rigorous federal and state accountability programs, and intense interest among taxpayers and government leaders in school-level performance, the demand for accountability among principals has never been greater.

Principal evaluation is emerging as a national policy focus, although it has been largely overshadowed by controversial developments in teacher evaluation, which have focused the public discourse about the nation's education system squarely on the quality of the teaching force. Creating better evaluation systems has emerged as a cornerstone of education reform, with federal policies highlighting the roles and responsibilities of teachers and principals and emphasizing the need for defining principal "effectiveness."

In 2009, Congress passed an economic stimulus bill that gave the U.S. Secretary of Education unprecedented authority, through the $4.35 billion Race to the Top federal competitive grant program. Race to the Top was designed to push massive reforms and compel states to remove legal, statutory or regulatory barriers and to link student achievement data to teachers and principals for evaluation purposes. At the same time, interim final requirements were issued for the School Improvement Grants (SIGs) program authorized under Title I of the ESEA. These final requirements incorporated new authority for SIG funds. States and districts were required to include new teacher and principal evaluation systems as part of the reform.

Spurred by aggressive reforms as a means to improve our nation's schools, states and districts have been lured to adopt new programs and procedures to comply with the federal government's unprecedented reach into the educator evaluation arena. To date, more than 30 states have also been granted waivers from the current accountability provisions of No Child Left Behind. The conditions of the waivers further compelled states to establish the effectiveness of teachers and principals through new evaluation systems, and districts are moving rapidly to design and implement new systems based on new parameters and measures.

Six Key Areas of Principal Influence

It is time to rethink principal and assistant principal evaluation and to put principals themselves at the center of that activity in an effort to build individual leadership capacity and school effectiveness.

In 2011, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) created a joint Principal Evaluation Committee to develop a framework for principal evaluation to be used as a guide for improving professional practice that leads to increased student learning. The framework includes six key domains of leadership responsibility that fall within a principal's sphere of influence. These include:

1 Professional Growth and Learning

Leadership development is a career-long learning experience for effective leaders. As accountability for schools and student learning has increased, so has the complexity of the role of the principal. To develop and sustain principal effectiveness, school leaders must actively pursue professional development and learning opportunities for themselves—in addition to those for their students and faculty.

2 Student Growth and Achievement

While they may lack direct control over student achievement outcomes, principals—as leaders of schools—are responsible for ensuring that student achievement goals are attained. To avoid an over-reliance on standardized scores of student achievement, data sources must include formative and summative teacher-administered test data; work sample scores; benchmark assessments; examples of scoring/grading rubrics; attendance rates; discipline referrals; graduation rates; student participation in cocurricular activities; ACT/SAT scores; advanced placement scores; scholarship awards and other special recognitions, and accomplishments received by students.

3 School Planning and Progress

A well-defined and well-executed school improvement plan can be a contributing factor for attaining high student achievement results. Performance data in this domain includes the principal's leadership practices; involvement in developing an effective SIP; engaging teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, community representatives and business partners and students in implementation of the plan; ability to develop and build the capacity of a strong leadership team; distribution of responsibilities across that team; selecting appropriate work; identifying the magnitude of change desired; and matching the personal management style to the change initiative.

4 School Culture

School culture nurtures school improvement efforts. A principal's ability to develop and maintain a positive school culture—where students, teachers and other staff are motivated to collaborate, to work smarter and to take risks to achieve higher goals—can accelerate improvements in student learning outcomes. Indicators of performance in this domain include a principal's abilities to develop collaborative processes that affirm the school's mission; ensure positive teacher working conditions; create time for instructional and teacher reflection; and engage teachers in high-quality professional development.

5 Professional Qualities and Instructional Leadership

A systemic principal evaluation system must include an assessment of principals' practice—their daily work. Indicators in this domain include portfolio artifacts of principal performance; the degree to which a principal achieved goals from the previous year's professional growth plan; observations of principal practice; the degree to which the principal provides actionable feedback to teachers to improve practice; 360-degree surveys of faculty, staff and evaluators; and self-reflections from principals. Principals say they want this evaluation to connect school quality and student learning assessments and to be tied to a common set of professional standards, including those found in ISLLC, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration and from their own associations, including NAESP's *Leading Learning Communities* and NASSP's *Breaking Ranks* publications.

6 Stakeholder Support and Engagement

Many factors outside of the classroom and school influence student learning, requiring principals to engage and gain stakeholder support to serve a wide range of medical, emotional and social needs of students. Indicators of a principal's performance in this domain include the ability to build strong relationships with stakeholders within and outside the school, and the ability to develop cultural competencies and communication skills in working with diverse stakeholders including students, families and community partners.

A Policy Focus for Principal Evaluation

The Principal Evaluation Committee offers a framework for evaluation that includes the voice of principals and their view of an effective principal evaluation system. That framework includes the four focus areas below, which are intended to offer a clear roadmap for federal, state and local policymakers as they rethink approaches to more efficacious principal evaluation.

Consider context. Principals and supervisors work collaboratively to develop goals and determine measures that consider the unique student, school and community contexts that influence a principal's job performance. Some key contextual factors to be considered when assessing an individual principal include student socioeconomic status; student mobility; student social, emotional, and behavioral issues; teacher experience; and available resources. Ideally, the district or statewide evaluation process is flexible enough to accommodate necessary differentiation based on a principal's work and grade-level responsibilities. Every aspect of an effective principal evaluation process assists principals and evaluators alike in creating a holistic and accurate description of each principal's practice.

Incorporate standards that can improve practice. While principals influence a range of school conditions, not all principals have the same roles, responsibilities, authority or autonomy in the school. Once the performance goals have been collaboratively established with the principal, the principal needs to be given the authority and autonomy to meet them. Strong evaluation systems incorporate widely accepted standards of practice so that results are relevant to the improvement of a principal's work and are routinely monitored and adapted to reflect the complex nature of the profession.

Use evaluation to build capacity. The purpose of evaluation is to build a principal's leadership capacity and encourage professional development. Results of the evaluation serve as a catalyst for a principal's growth and learning. Capacity-building evaluation systems include comprehensive support structures and resources for professional development, reflective practice, induction support for early career principals, personalized professional growth plans, and advanced certification/recognition for accomplished practice. Employment decisions rely on multiple sets of evaluation data over time, not a one-time supervisory visit. Evaluation results are not intended to be punitive for the evaluation to fulfill its purpose. All evaluators need training to gather precise assessment data and analyze evaluation results within the protocols and rubrics of the design.

Focus on multiple measures of performance data. Historically, principal evaluation systems have focused on measuring principal preparation and practice. Currently, many emerging state evaluation systems are focusing on one outcome: student achievement results as measured by standardized test scores. Because of the myriad of factors involved in student achievement and its measurement and the complexity of a principal's role in student achievement, principals require substantive feedback about much more than outcome measures related to student achievement. Effective feedback is timely, accurate, valid and applicable to building capacity for future performance. Accurate evaluation of a principal's holistic performance requires the collection and analysis of a comprehensive set of data gathered from multiple sources.

Essential Features of Comprehensive Evaluation Systems

The following areas were identified by principals as essential features, supported by research, of sound evaluation practices:

Created by and for principals. Effective evaluation system designs will be accurate and useful when principals are active contributors to the process.

Systemic support. Effective principal evaluation is part of a comprehensive system of support, including quality professional development, induction support for early career principals and recognition of advanced performance.

Flexibility. Principals' relationships with supervisors, schools and communities impact leadership. Effective processes to evaluate principal practice accommodate local contexts, reflect a principal's years of experience and are job-specific. These processes provide supervisors with sufficient flexibility to accommodate necessary differentiation based on principals' work and grade-level responsibilities.

Relevance. Effective evaluation systems incorporate widely accepted standards of practice so results are relevant to the improvement of principals' current work. Routine monitoring of principal evaluation systems maintains relevance and facilitates adaptations to reflect the dynamic nature of the profession

Accuracy, validity, reliability. Supervisors and principals will use evaluation results to inform decisions regarding professional development and continued employment. Consequently, evaluation processes must be collaborative; provide accurate, valid and reliable information; and gather performance data through multiple measures.

Fairness. Fair evaluations are transparent, systematically applied to all principals in a state or district and place a high priority on outcomes principals control rather than those they have limited or no ability to impact. Decisions about continued employment rely on multiple years of evaluation data. In addition, effective principal evaluation systems treat performance assessment as a positive process that builds principals' capacity, not as a pretext for discipline.

Utility. Meaningful evaluation results inform principals' learning and progress, regardless of summative ratings of practice. An effective formative and summative process is useful to principals and evaluators for creating a holistic description of practice.

It is more helpful if evaluation is purposed for principal motivation and validation. Principals and supervisors need to tailor the six evaluation domains, noted in this report, to the unique needs of each school and apply them to match each principal's areas of responsibility. The context is going to be unique to each site—school and district, but to be effective, local context must be factored into the evaluation equation. I believe this will result in higher achievement for children.

Jon Millerhagen, Principal, Washburn Elementary School, Minneapolis, Minnesota

I believe that the framework proposed expands the evaluation focus on the potential roles of the 21st century principal. If used holistically, it has the potential of increasing the capacity of a principal's knowledge and leadership skills in areas that are not currently defined.

Carol Seid, Principal, Fairmeadows Elementary School, West Des Moines, Iowa

What an individual principal brings to the evaluation process is critical. The personal schema proposed in this document will provide a foundation for professional development. The key will be how principals and supervisors come together to define "reasonable" goals and measure progress.
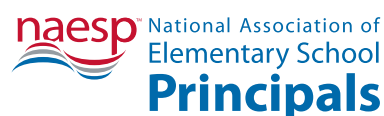
Peter Bonaccorsi, Principal, Heron Pond Elementary School, Milford, New Hampshire

This visionary document provides criterion for what a good evaluation process looks like and how it will influence principal best practices. These practical guidelines address the areas of theory, management, accountability expectations and reform initiatives, with the intent to address the demands that principals face daily.

Judith Martin-Tafoya, Principal, Truman Middle School, Albuquerque, New Mexico

The Principal Evaluation Committee was comprised of principals from urban and rural school districts with schools ranging from small to large. They represented practitioners from all over the nation. Valuable information was gleaned from this group of practicing principals to capture the voice of the principal in the development of fair guidelines for principal evaluation.

Maria Bradley, Principal, North Murray High School, Chatsworth, Georgia